

# CREATIVITY IN AN AGE OF CONSTRAINT

Lionel Shriver



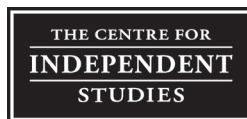
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# **CREATIVITY IN AN AGE OF CONSTRAINT**

**By Lionel Shriver**

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# Creativity in an Age of Constraint

**D**on't take this wrong, but when I last left Australia in September of 2016 I vowed that I'd never come back.

I'd been asked to deliver the opening address of the Brisbane literary festival. The organizers had originally requested that I speak on the theme of "community and belonging." I told them for such a soft, sappy topic they had the wrong speaker. By all means, choose your own subject, they wrote back. I proposed to speak about identity politics in fiction, and received wholehearted approval.

I was displeased to discover on arrival in Brisbane that the program still listed the lecture as addressing "community and belonging." The audience was surely relieved when instead I addressed a subject that wouldn't put them right to sleep.

I chose to focus on a concept I'd only recently encountered, which at the time had primarily been used to castigate adventurous musicians and fashion designers. "Cultural appropriation" was a brand new taboo: "stealing" from other people's traditions for your own evil creative purposes without "permission"—although it was baffling however one might go about securing such a license. In 2016, I was hard-pressed to come up with examples of this peculiar no-no being used to impugn works of fiction. But I did manage to dig up the fact that the white male British novelist Chris Cleave had been chided in reviews and on social media for daring to employ a female Nigerian character in his latest book. I worried that if this sort of rebuke spread, the new taboo could be catastrophic for my occupation, one wholly dependent on imagining what it's like to be someone else. Alas, only three years later I'd have found copious examples of fiction writers who've had their knuckles rapped for helping themselves to what didn't belong to them.

Before delivering that lecture, I'd been solely concerned that my thesis was so self-evident that the speech would be boring. I advanced the moderate, common-sense proposition that to insist on authors only writing about people just like themselves would be to eliminate fiction altogether and leave only memoir. The main of the audience seemed genial and open to address, which I tried to keep lively, and at least I didn't hear anyone start to snore. Yet I was later informed that one audience member, a 24-year-old from Southern Sudan, flounced down the middle aisle and out of the venue—to be followed, after several minutes, by her concerned mother.

The young woman, Yassmin Abdel-Magied—who has dined out on her rude exit ever since—promptly posted an indignant screed online about how deeply hurt and offended she was by my talk (much of which she did not hear). Said screed was so overwritten that it was actually funny. Despite the overwrought prose, the *Guardian*, which has an increasingly, shall we say, *ambivalent* relationship to my politics, picked up the blog and posted it on the paper's website. The rest is history.

When I arrived at the green room for my solo event on my latest novel the following day, I was immediately braced by two local festival participants, one of them squarely built and twice my size. After the two women declared proudly that they'd not attended my speech—we may therefore infer that they'd no idea what I said—they loomed threateningly an inch from my face and accused me of insulting Australian minorities. I was baffled. The speech never mentioned Australian minorities.

When I arrived at my event venue, I found that the festival had organized a “right of reply” protest immediately across the hall from my solo appearance, and this rabble must also have been full of people who'd not attended the address. But then, with the chronically enraged, not knowing what you're talking about is an advantage.

To set the record straight, I had my publicist post the keynote's text online. Meanwhile, the festival administrators informed the press that I had spoken “beyond my gift,” and had no permission to address this topic. When my publisher sent the organizers a copy of the email thread demonstrating that they knew perfectly well what I would

speak about and had given the topic their blessing, we got back sorrow about my “hurt” and “pain.” I wasn’t hurt or in pain. I was pissed off. And they’re lucky I’m not litigious. Advertising that I go rogue at the podium impugned my reputation, and potentially curtailed future speaking invitations like this one. (After all, what would you think if instead of discussing “Creativity in the Age of Constraint,” your speaker this evening capriciously riffed about “Community and Belonging”?)

But this tempest in an Australian teacup burst well beyond your borders. Media across the world piled on: not only all the Australian papers, but the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *New Yorker*, the *LA Times*, naturally the *Guardian* as well as all the other British papers, the UK’s *Channel 4 News* and *Newsnight*... This deluge of commentary was abundantly condemnatory, amid a few isolated voices of defense. And the story, such as there was one, was widely misreported. One woman walking out, followed five minutes later by her mother, transformed into a mass audience desertion. The festival’s lies about my having gone off on some crazed, unauthorized rant were propagated everywhere. My final flourish of donning a sombrero—a droll little reference to the speech’s intro, and worn only during the last *three words* of the speech—was mis-described in every account. According to news reports, I’d worn the sombrero belligerently during the entire 45-minute address. Now, that was slanderous, too. I have a far better sense of theatre.

In private, I received a surprising quantity of supportive email, some from friends I didn’t know I had, but most of these defenders didn’t take a public stand. Oh, and that British writer Chris Cleave, whose novel I stuck up for? He’s never spoken to me again.

It had been my intention to nip in the bud a poorly thought-out hard-left injunction that had the capacity, if widely applied, to make my occupation untenable. Instead I fear that I helped spread the very concept that I’d hoped to discourage. Mea culpa. For “cultural appropriation” has in this last three years become widely regarded as forbidden in fiction. Why, earlier this year my poor 23-year-old niece was taking a fiction-writing workshop in St Louis, Missouri, and the class spent an entire session on horrible Lionel Shriver and her



horrible views on cultural appropriation. I really admired my niece for bravely admitting halfway through that I was her aunt, though I don't believe she ever lived down the ensuing stigma with her classmates.

I confess that I'm sick of this subject. Nevertheless, my opposition to this harebrained notion has grown only more implacable. It took me a while to figure out that the "appropriation" foofaraw is in part about the commodification of identity. In many of those indignant 2016 articles, I encountered frequent outrage that pale-faced authors were *making money* from experience that wasn't theirs to sell. Thus the idea must be to reduce supply of writing about "marginalized communities," and therefore to increase demand. Presumably if we white writers are prevented from using "stolen" material—if we're required, in the latest lingo, to "stay in our lane"—then, clamoring for fiction about characters from Southern Sudan, the minority-starved reading public will turn Yassmin Abdel-Magied's recent first novel into a best seller. I fear this model displays a poor understanding of economics and publishing both.

In literature, too, ideological predation on established writers is intended to allow younger, woker folks to take their place. When I was coming of age, we younger writers were eager to find mentors whom we admired, and with whom we often tried to ingratiate ourselves in graduate MFA programs. We inhaled the work of accomplished predecessors, the better to hone our own skills. We now have a generation that simply "cancels" the older generation, the better to clear the stage and clamber onto it. (None of these people read anymore, but mysteriously they all still want to be writers. Go figure.) What I encountered in Brisbane hewed to an ugly behavioral model that has more in common with big game hunting than with art.

More fundamentally, I challenge the propositions that any of us "own" our own culture, that a culture is even subject to strict definition, and that a culture has any borders that can therefore be rigidly policed. Because we are all elements in other people's landscapes, our experience—how we act, what we say, what traditions we observe—is also an ingredient in other people's experience. Thus I would submit: we do not even own exclusive title to ourselves. I reject this hoarding, hostile, selfish relationship to "identity." Better that we all conduct

our work and social lives in a spirit of sharing, generosity, exploration, curiosity, experimentation, and even willingness to fail in our sincere efforts to understand one another.

But apparently we white writers are now on notice that we don't have "permission" to write nonwhite characters. There was actually a headline I tripped over online during the Brisbane hullabaloo, atop an article I didn't choose to read: "Lionel Shriver Should not Write Minority Characters"—just in case I hadn't got the message loudly and clearly enough. Ironically, this implies that authors like me are obliged to portray the Western world as if it's still the 1950s. Off the page, our countries may grow ever more "diverse," but between book covers we're back to apartheid. Furthermore, if you take this piggy paradigm of exclusive cultural "ownership" to its logical conclusion, then white people "own" their cultures, too. This means minority fiction writers need *my* permission to write *white* characters. For that matter, if we're carving up the world into what does and does not "belong" to us, nonwhite people also don't get to listen to Beethoven, read Charles Dickens, dance to Talking Heads, or use an iPhone.

The strictures now constraining the imaginations of fiction writers are not limited to a ban on cultural kleptomania. All artists today are encouraged to be political, but only in the service of a narrow hard-left orthodoxy. Any novel that challenges the trans activist movement or the 100% socially and economically beneficial character of today's mass immigration to the West will attract a Twitter mob and scathing reviews. And that's assuming you could get such books published in the first place. For the last few years, publishing has been awash in novels with protagonists "born in the wrong body." But just try getting a book published about a young person who gets a sex-change operation and regrets it. Or about hero or heroine whose neighbourhood has been transformed beyond recognition by immigration and is even the tiniest bit dismayed. Cutting edge artists were once famously "transgressive." Now to be cutting edge is to be cookie-cutter. Despite the maverick reputation of the "artist," I live in a world of conformity. I don't personally know a single fiction writer in my home in London who supports Brexit.



You know, even having *characters* voice views or behave in a manner that runs contrary to progressive mores is now dangerous, because the “it wasn’t me, it was my imaginary friend” defense will no longer wash. At the 2016 Sewanee Writers Conference in Tennessee, fellow authors accused Allen Wier of a “microaggression” because three old men in a baseball park ogled a young woman *in his short story*. Whole plots have been demonized as promoting a “white savior narrative.” Last year’s film *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* attracted heavy flak because its racist cop rounds into a half-decent human being. Writers can refurbish murderers into good guys, but must never redeem a racist.

It’s especially perilous for a novelist to express anything but officially approved progressive opinions in *nonfiction*—and as a prolific comment writer and columnist, I should know. Because I care about my fiction career far more than about my journalism, I’m an idiot. I should have kept my noxious libertarian views about tax policy, the EU, and affirmative action to myself. Having betrayed that I’m not in Jeremy Corbyn’s or Bernie Sanders’ ideological pocket, I’ve made myself a target of animosity for virtually all the people who can influence my career—who commission the manuscripts, judge the literary prizes, award the writing residencies, and assign the reviews. For politically, my professional milieu is almost perfectly homogeneous. In outing myself in journalism, I’ve branded myself an outsider, if not an exile, amongst my own kind.

Hence I now get a brand of review I’ve come to recognize—whose author pre-hated me, and read my novel only with a view to locating unforgivable sins against social justice. A friend of mine who teaches criticism at Columbia’s MFA program in New York confirmed that this recent inclination to judge literature in accordance with its adherence to a political catechism is not all in my head. Despairing to me over a glass of white wine last summer, she said that all her criticism students think the job of a critic is to assess a given work in accordance with its implicit racial or sexual mores. Her students won’t even cut historical texts any slack if the content doesn’t line up perfectly with contemporary progressive values.

Writing fiction used to be a hoot. Now it’s fraught with anxiety. My colleagues and I have been made destructively self-conscious about

any sentence that touches on race, ethnicity, disability, gender, sexual harassment or assault, Israel, colonialism, imperialism, diversity, class, or inequality—and that list of terrifying subjects keeps getting longer. As a consequence, too many of today's artists are struggling to be "good" rather to do "well." Perpetual nervousness that a foot wrong could get you banished from civilization for life is not conducive to making art at all, much less outstanding art.

Publishers' practice of employing "sensitivity readers" to vet and censure manuscripts is currently restricted largely to Young Adult fiction, but could soon be coming to a mainstream publisher near you. Self-appointed experts in the delicate feelings of a range of protected special-interest groups supposedly ensure that the text doesn't offend anyone—although at this point if your book doesn't offend *anyone*, it's probably not worth reading. Writers trying to please such cultural gate keepers can't help but come up against an intrinsic lose-lose scenario: you can employ stereotypes, which is bad. Or you can defy stereotypes, in which case you're inauthentic.

After #MeToo, we authors are also fearful about how we behave at parties, which could not only invite personal censure but get our books withdrawn from the shelves. Now that the presumption of innocence is out the window, we have to protect ourselves from both our real sexual lapses and mere accusations of such lapses. Ask Junot Diaz. It took months of ignominy to clear the author's name after he was accused of planting an unwanted kiss, and meanwhile booksellers banned his work. Remember when writers like Hemingway were expected to be wanton, licentious hell-raisers who drank too much? I'm perfectly capable of batting the odd hand from my knee, so please give me back the old days, when being a novelist was good fun.

As a throwback, I value originality and elegance. Thus I especially resent the pressure to employ an artificially imposed lexicon of dopy expressions. At least "woke" is now deliciously employed mostly at the wokery's expense. But the pestilent label "privileged" still translates "shut the fuck up." The arcane construction "people of color" is now entrenched, when if you said "colored people" you'd get arrested. So should folks with European heritage now call themselves "people of whiteness"? "Problematic" and "troubling" are now coy synonyms for "unspeakably evil," while the exercise of freedom of speech or

even harmless vaping horrifyingly “normalizes” the unacceptable. We don’t seem to have “minorities” anymore but only the mouthful “marginalized communities.” The deliberately repulsive neologism “cisgender” pathologizes people who are born women, say, and thus ludicrously imagine that they are women. “Nonbinary” substitutes for what used to be called “confused.” No one has plain old “experience” anymore, but the pompously redundant “lived experience.” It bewilders me why anyone would coin “microaggression,” which is presumably imperceptible to the naked eye, and maintain at the same time that we’re all still supposed to get upset about it. Once a useful term for glossing over iniquity, “whitewashing” now refers to when *actors* actually *act* as if they’re *a completely different character*. Astonishingly, kids on campus continue to use wussy, weak-kneed terms like “safe spaces” and “triggering” with a straight face, while promoting goofball neo-pronouns like “ze” or “zir” that make text not only unreadable but unintentionally hilarious. Or we’re to give up on the distinction between the singular and plural altogether and call every individual a “they.” The singular general case is no longer male but female—which makes no more sense, and is no more just, than the male default—while conventions like “men and women” have to be reversed to “women and men.” Jargon makes bad art. It even makes intolerable newspaper articles.

Oh, and then there’s the list of words you *can’t* use—perfectly respectable words that some people are too poorly educated to understand, like “niggardly,” or color words that have nothing to do with race, like “blackmail.” You can’t employ expressions like “whiter than white”—whose innocent evocation in the UK recently got a policeman suspended. Even the word “slave” is off the table, because anyone subjugated by another isn’t, in his or her essence, a slave, so we have to say “enslaved person”—which frankly endangers any noun that refers to a human being. If, as people, butchers and bakers and candlestick makers cannot, in their essence, be distilled to their professions, those words will be forbidden, too; we’ll be left with “butchering people” and “baking people” and maybe “people of candlestick making.” I’m content to ditch “chairman” for “chair,” which is agreeably shorter, but for pity’s sake, the city council of San

Francisco has now *legislated* that a “manhole” must now be called a “maintenance hole.”

What are we all to do? Because this watch-your-step environment is not only a problem for artists. We’re all being coached to use dumb expressions, to edit what we say lest we violate a host of unwritten regulations, and to be increasingly avoidant of people different from ourselves not because we’re bigots but because we might say something wrong.

The hard left’s code of conduct is drafted by people with no authority. A small group of self-nominated tyrants concocted “cultural appropriation” as an unpardonable transgression, but that doesn’t mean we have to pay any attention to these bullies. The only thing that gives made-up rules any teeth is obeying them. I’m an old-school rebel: tell me I can’t do something and my immediate impulse is to do it. Now that I’ve been instructed, in a headline no less, “Lionel Shriver Shouldn’t Write Minority Characters,” my kneejerk disobedience has kicked right in. My upcoming novel includes two black characters, one a dead nice guy, and another a second-generation Nigerian-American who’s absolutely *unbearable*. Having crafted this incompetent black diversity hire will surely get me into trouble. But at this point I may be courting trouble on purpose. It’s vital to stand up to these moral midgets. You can only dispense with silly rules by breaking them, and any freedoms that you don’t exercise you’re bound to lose. This means resisting the all-too-rational protective urge to self-censor, too. Ostensibly, daring artists push the confining cultural boundaries of their times. When he wrote it, Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* was outrageous, and Roth meant it to be outrageous.

We can also maintain our senses of humor. The best weapon against people who take themselves too seriously is not to denounce but to make fun of them. They deserve it, and we deserve a good belly laugh at their expense.

It’s also important to come to the defense, publicly and not only in private email queues, of artists, academics, journalists, and thinkers who have stuck their necks out only to have their heads chopped off. The august yet temporarily disgraced philosopher Roger Scruton in the UK, who was crucified by an irresponsible journalist taking his

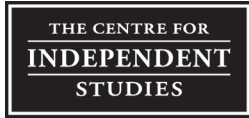
quotes out of context, was only restored to respectability with the assistance of friends and allies who advocated on his behalf.

Otherwise, we just have to weather the storm. This leftwing mania for dos and don'ts can't last forever. I fear what may be required is some sort of catastrophe, one that makes "microaggressions" suddenly seem as trivial as the expression suggests. This lunatic authoritarian obsession with an infinitely growing list of rules in relation to an infinitely growing list of specially protected categories of people? It's an ailment born of prosperity. It's the ultimate first-world problem. A plague of antibiotic-resistant flesh-eating bacteria across the planet might kill billions of people, but it would also wipe identity politics right off the map. In my desperation to restore sanity, playfulness, mischief, and abandon to our cultural landscape, I just hope I don't have to resort to disseminating the bacteria myself.

Both artists and arts consumers need to return to first principles. That is, the purpose of art is not to do good. A given novelist may choose to promote the author's version of virtue, but being good-as-in-virtuous is not what makes a book good-as-in-excellent. When a novel does successfully engage with vexing moral questions, it commonly does so when the right thing to do in a given situation is anything but obvious. It's time to return to valuing not only nuance and complexity, but anarchy, wickedness, and heresy. It's time to stop feeling obliged to be such good little campers, at least in our heads. Both writers and readers need to feel free to explore the unseemly underbelly of our imaginations. After all—aren't books the ultimate "safe space"?

And sometimes we just have to talk about something else—something besides whatever group is socially disadvantaged this week, or what remark some public figure made about race or gender that's supposedly beyond the pale. Sometimes we authors have to *write* about something else—and give speeches about something else, so maybe I'm even apologizing for this evening's topic. Because for me, the biggest trap of this whole identity politics lark has been getting lured into debating a proposition that's unworthy of my address. I get drawn into fights from which I'd be better off just walking away. I'm genuinely embarrassed to have continually explained what I think

is wrong with the concept of “cultural appropriation” for three solid years. It’s a dumb idea, and it’s dumb terminology. Call it “cultural *appreciation*” and the argument is over. For there’s a way in which, when you spend your precious time on this earth battling something dumb, even if your reasoning at length prevails, you’ve nevertheless thrown your pearls before swine, and the morons have still won.



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John Bonython Lecture for the Centre for Independent Studies

# Creativity in an Age of Constraint

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The proliferating dos and don'ts of political correctness, the predations of 'gotcha' identity politics and the hypersensitivities of the #MeToo movement are battering and boxing creativity.

There is a danger in faithfully following this host of concocted rules and dutifully avoiding stepping on a plethora of toes. Among other things, it could lead to bad, obedient art. It's time the creative professions pushed back.

Lionel Shriver challenges the propositions that any of us 'own' our own culture, that a culture is even subject to strict definition, and that a culture has any borders that can therefore be rigidly policed. "Because we are all elements in other people's landscapes, our experience—how we act, what we say, what traditions we observe—is also an ingredient in other people's experience. Thus I would submit: we do not even own exclusive title to ourselves. I reject this hoarding, hostile, selfish relationship to 'identity'. Better that we all conduct our work and social lives in a spirit of sharing, generosity, exploration, curiosity, experimentation, and even willingness to fail in our sincere efforts to understand one another."

**Lionel Shriver** is author of numerous international bestseller novels and a columnist with *The Spectator* in London. Her new book called *Property* (HarperCollins), is a collection of witty and quirky stories about the ownership of not just houses, but objects, people, places and experiences.

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